



# Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier

**The Supreme Court's 1969 ruling in *Tinker v. Des Moines* found that public school students had a First Amendment right to freedom of speech in the school. Did those rights extend to freedom of the press?**

**SS.7.C.3.12** Analyze the significance and outcomes of landmark Supreme Court cases including, but not limited to, *Marbury v. Madison*, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Gideon v. Wainwright*, *Miranda v. Arizona*, *in re Gault*, *Tinker v. Des Moines*, *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, *United States v. Nixon*, and *Bush v. Gore*.

### Background of the Case

Hazelwood East High School, near St. Louis, Missouri, had a school newspaper for students in its journalism classes. Before each issue, Principal Robert Reynolds reviewed the pages. While looking over an issue, Reynolds objected to two articles. One article was about three students who were pregnant. The other talked about one student's experience with parents who were getting a divorce. No students' names were used in the articles. Nevertheless, Reynolds felt readers could easily identify who the students were. For that reason, he canceled the two pages on which those articles appeared.

Kathy Kuhlmeier and two other students who worked on the newspaper did not like this decision. They sued the school. They claimed that their First Amendment rights to freedom of the press had been denied.

### The Decision

Relying on the Supreme Court's decision in *Tinker v. Des Moines*, a lower court ruled in favor of the students. The school appealed the case to the Supreme Court. On January 8, 1988, the Supreme Court reversed this ruling. The Court drew a sharp line between individual expression—which it supported in *Tinker*—and the content of a school newspaper. Justice Byron R. White wrote:

“A school must be able to set high standards for the student speech that is disseminated [distributed] under its [sponsorship] . . . and may refuse to disseminate student speech that does not meet those standards.”



Teachers serve as advisers to the students who work on school newspapers.

### Why It Matters

The *Hazelwood* decision did not, of course, take away all First Amendment rights from school newspapers. Nevertheless, supporters of free speech and student interest groups said that the *Hazelwood* decision meant censorship. The Student Press Law Center reports that a number of schools, fearing lawsuits, have done away with student newspapers. Following this decision, some schools have even blocked the publication of student yearbooks. Others have moved to stop stage performances or to censor the content of student-based Web pages.

### Analyzing the Case

1. **Analyzing** Why did the students writing for the school newspaper sue the school?
2. **Concluding** How do you think the *Hazelwood* decision could affect a school's responsibility to educate?